THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Lesson of Mt. Moriah

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John M. Buchanan

"Nowhere in the Bible are we given to understand that by faithful study and good works, or even with a little bit of luck, we will be able to understand all that we need to know about the fundamental mystery of our relationship to God. Those who think that a careful, painstaking study of the scriptures will reveal all to them in the fullness of time have understood neither the scriptures nor God.... It is in scripture, in that marvelous assault upon virtuous knowledge, in the book of Job, where the great question is asked 'Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?'... The deep things of God of which the Bible speaks in nearly its every breath are not problems waiting to be solved but a mystery into which we are invited to enter, discover, explore, and indeed to enjoy, forever."

Peter J. Gomes
The Good Book

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE LESSON OF MT. MORIAH

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Matthew 10: 34-42
Genesis 22: 1-14

". . . I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son. . . " Genesis 22:12

This is the day you have made, O Lord, and we rejoice in it. We rejoice in the blessings of our life together; for the beauty of the world, the vitality of our city; for the privilege of a day of rest, and time to be quiet and reflect on the week past and the week ahead. We are grateful to be here in your presence. We listen for your word, your summons, your call. Startle us, O God, with your presence and your love and your expectations. And give us courage to respond in faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There are, I have found over the years, many very good reasons for not using the story of Abraham and Isaac for a sermon text and so I never have. It comes around in the lectionary every three years in June, and every time it does, something in me is always amused by the fact that it usually lands on Father's Day or a week away. What a story for Father's Day!

At the meeting of the General Assembly, ministers talk shop. We all have to go home and preach and so routinely we ask each other, "What are you going to preach on?" Those who use the lectionary know what the texts are. Talking to one of my favorite preachers, I asked, "Will you preach on Abraham and Isaac or the cup of cold water?" She said, "Are you crazy? I am sticking with cold water."

This is a terrifying text, an appalling story. It is also, I propose, a holy story.

Gregory Jones, the Dean of Duke Divinity School, wrote an essay recently about parenting which referred to this story. Jones describes a conversation he had with a family friend who described her approach to parental responsibility as "I just want my children to be happy." Jones suggests that "I just want my children to be happy" has become a mantra, a kind of catch-all moral imperative which is the delight of marketers and makers of child products—with adult implications. "I just want to be happy." What could be simpler, more elemental than that? And what's wrong with it? Is it so wrong to want to be happy? Of course not—unless and until the pursuit of happiness becomes our only and all-consuming passion, our icon and our god. Then something is very seriously wrong in our heart and soul and probably the rest of us as well.

Jones quips, "Clearly we can make no sense of this awesome, difficult call from God that Abraham sacrifice his own son if we live in a world in which our highest priority is that our children be happy." (*The Christian Century,* May 19-26)

There are a lot of very good reasons for staying away from this story. And yet it has always intrigued me. What is going on here, really? Does God really want that father to kill his own son? And what kind of father would do such a thing? And what kind of son, big and strong enough to carry wood up the mountain, would not at least put up a struggle and try to run away? Isn't this story what's wrong with religion—so frequently willing to sacrifice the precious lives of its young people for some silly theological premise? Sending our young people onto the battle field to die for our creeds and honor? Isn't this simply an embarrassment?

And yet—and yet. The ancient tradition is that Mt. Moriah is the very spot where Solomon's temple was later located. And while there is no empirical evidence that it is true, the tradition reminds us that there is substance here and that we should not be too quick to discard it.

What is your candidate for the worst moment in American history? Mine is May 4, 1970, when units of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on demonstrating students on the campus of Kent State University. I recall it so vividly. American young people, not much younger than I at the time (my brother was a graduate student at Kent State) killed by American soldiers, on American soil, for demonstrating. In the aftermath, a distinguished American artist, George Segal, was commissioned to do a sculpture in memory of the students who died. He chose the story of Abraham and Isaac for his theme and cast them in modern clothing, the young man kneeling in front of his powerful father who looms menacingly over his son with a knife in his hand. The Governor of the State, James Rhodes, wouldn't let the sculpture in Ohio, so it sits today behind the chapel at Princeton University, a remarkable and terrifying and strong work of art.

So bear with me as we look at the story again and think about it a bit. Walter Bruggemann says it is the most theologically demanding story in the Bible. It helps to recall the context.

Back on the very edge of recorded history, in what we might be inclined to call pre-civilization, God, the Creator, who does not yet even have a name, stirs the hearts and souls of an ancient nomadic couple and plants in their spirit the notion that God is creating a people to show the rest of the world who God is and what God hopes for and expects from all people. It is a great blessing and it is a great responsibility.

The couple is old. They have no children. But then a son is born, Isaac. Isaac has an older half-brother by the name of Ishmael. After Abraham and Sarah figure out how to get Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, out of the story, God takes care of them too, reminding Abraham and Sarah and all who read their story that there are no expendable people, no disposable people, that God is compassionate and kind and hears the cries of an infant, an outcast.

The story of God and God's people continues. Isaac grows. Isaac will inherit the promise, the blessing and the responsibility. And then one day Abraham hears the voice of God, who now has something of a name although no one says it out loud—ever. It's just a series of Hebrew consonants which we pronounce Yahweh. So Abraham hears Yahweh/God, and the voice of God says something stunning and terrible.

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you."

And if that isn't bad enough, what comes next is worse.

"So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two servants and Isaac, and some wood and a fire pot and set out." For three days they travel—father with heavy heart, the son whom he loves. The text tells us that three times so we don't forget the enormity of what is transpiring. Some scholars, by the way, want us to focus on that, Abraham's love for his son which, back on the edge of history, is remarkable enough. On the third day they arrive. Abraham and Isaac proceed alone and Isaac asks the obvious question: "Where is the lamb?" And Abraham's answer is the key to this whole business and either the bravest or silliest thing anyone ever said. "God will provide."

That's good enough for Isaac. He trusts his father. Abraham trusts God and the terrible drama continues right up to the last terrifying moment when an angel does appear and God does provide and a ram is right there in the thicket, not by accident, but because God put it there, and Isaac is unbound and the ancient ceremony is performed and they go home.

The three day journey leads to Beersheba. And I have never stopped wondering what they talked about as they walked home. Did they ever mention it again, father and son, that harrowing experience, that day when they both experienced the raw mystery and awesome presence of the God whose name is so holy you do not dare pronounce it, and the sheer amazing grace and providence of this God who does not desire the sacrifice of innocent children but can be counted on to provide for their need? Did that experience bind them together, old man and young son, who soon would have to stand alone without his parents, with only the memory, and stand alone with God and his wife and his own precious sons and daughters?

Thomas Cahill, author of the best seller, *How the Irish Saved Civilization,* has written another wonderful book, *The Gifts of the Jews,* which I found to be very helpful in reminding us that this story and others like it are very old. It is not particularly helpful to compare the behavior of the people in these stories with ourselves but with the other people at the time, the clans and tribes of other nomadic desert people or other emerging civilizations. You don't measure Abraham's behavior by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights or the United States Constitution, but the Code of Hammurabi and the religious practices of the Sumerian people who were the major civilization at the time about which we know anything.

Human sacrifice, not a savory sermon topic, was ,nonetheless, not uncommon. Cahill asks if the story is "a symbolic renunciation, the dramatization of some unrecoverable moment

in pre-history when the proto-Jews gave up the practice of human sacrifice when their neighbors continued to engage in it?" (p.83)

We can't know that for sure. What Cahill thinks is happening is the emergence of an idea of God very different from anything else in history. Ancient people were polytheists. They had many gods. Divinity was lodged in statues and amulets they wore around their neck. Religion was a kind of good luck charm to ward off wild animals and all the threats of nature. What's happening here is the emergence of an idea of God who is one, who is the creator and provider. A God who comes down to engage people, to talk to them, to give orders, but also to share hopes and dreams. A God who understands and participates in human love and passion and grief and faith. This is a living God; a God far greater than statues and amulets and good luck charms. This is a God not always manageable, not always understandable, but a God who can be counted on to be present and involved in human life, a God who in an ultimate way can be trusted with our lives and the lives of our dear ones. Thomas Cahill writes: "This is a very different God—this is the only God that counts."

British theologian and biblical scholar J. B. Phillips wrote a popular book a generation ago entitled *Your God is Too Small* which maintained that the fundamental heresy of our time was the creation of a God designed to meet human hopes, expectations and intellectual capacity, a likeable, sometimes irritable but always understandable God, a God, Phillips said, who was far too small.

And that, I believe, continues to be the case. Someone observed recently that the innocuous god of civil religion, the god who wants no more from us than lip-service, an occasional acknowledgment by way of public invocations at civic affairs or the nailing of the Ten Commandments to the school room wall is no god at all, but merely our own amulet, a good luck charm to ward off evil, and, in this nation, to win elections.

Thomas Cahill writes, "Can we open ourselves to the God who cannot be understood, who is beyond our amulets and our scheming . . . All other gods are figments, sorry projections of human desire. Only this God is worth my life and Isaac's and your life. For there is no other." (p.86)

What Abraham and Isaac learned that day is that there is a God, and that life with God, in God's providence and grace, authentic human life, calls something deep out of our souls, some willingness to trust and believe; some willingness to give and sacrifice and live for something other than our own survival; something called faith. What Abraham and Isaac learned that day is perhaps the most important lesson that any of us can ever learn, and that is that you are not alive until you find something to die for.

At Princeton Seminary in the 1950's a Chinese Christian student, who had narrowly escaped imprisonment and death, powerfully moved his comfortable and secure fellow students with a prayer which has now become famous: "O God give us something to die for; for if we have nothing for which we would die, we are not alive."

Greg Jones, the Duke Divinity School Dean, in the essay to which I referred, remembered the conversation with a friend who described her parenting theory and practice in terms

of making her children happy. Jones also describes a remarkable conversation in a Duke classroom. A South African church leader was a visiting lecturer. The man had been deeply involved in the struggle against apartheid. His story was harrowing and inspiring as he described the risks he had taken and the suffering and oppression and persecution and imprisonment and torture he had endured.

After the lecture a Duke student asked what his children had thought about it all. How had they coped with the risks and suffering the family endured because of the parents' commitment to justice?

Jones said that it was a difficult moment. The South African minister told how painful it was because his children did suffer, received death threats and hateful phone calls. He described the pain of being away from them for long periods of time.

The whole thing was so painful that he and his wife had spent much time talking about it and they had even asked their childrens' forgiveness.

But, he said, "all four of his children now recognize the family's involvement in the struggle as a gift . . .even amidst the pain and suffering they endured growing up, they are grateful for the witness their family bore. They see that witness as a gift, for they recognize that their parents taught them the importance of having convictions on which you would stake your life."

What children need, Jones proposes, and what we all need, I would add, is the gift of a cause, a project, a mission which calls to the very depths of our souls and is big enough and important enough and holy enough to demand our all. "We should protest," Jones says, "not only when children are abused and neglected, but when they are left with shallow and hollow lives because they have never been invited and required to live for something more significant than themselves."

That's what Abraham and Isaac learned on Mt. Moriah.

Centuries later another man would climb a mountain, and like Isaac carrying the wood for the altar, he would carry his cross.

And the meaning and the message would be the same—there are some things worth dying for, and to know that and find that passion and love is to know what it is to be truly alive . . . and that God wants that for each and every one of us . . .wants us to be alive, wants us to learn to care and love enough to give our hearts, our love, our lives, and in that giving, that "yes," that commitment, to be fully and joyfully alive.

And as we do that, God can be trusted with our lives, our futures, even our deaths.

The man carrying his cross was a true child of Abraham. He was Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, our Savior and Lord.

All praise to him. Amen.